

# **Fact Sheet**

## **Age Healthier, Breathe Easier**

**April 2004**

First in a Series of Information for Older Adults and Family Caregivers

Did you know that Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, claiming approximately 119,000 lives each year?<sup>1</sup> In 2000, COPD caused 726,000 hospitalizations and 1.5 million hospital emergency room visits.<sup>1</sup> COPD includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema - lung diseases which frequently coexist and are characterized by obstruction to air flow, making it difficult to breathe. Smokers are particularly at risk of developing COPD, however, it also been linked to workplace exposure to dust and fumes. Symptoms include chronic cough, increased mucus production, chest tightness, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing.

More than two million Americans 65 and older have asthma. In 2001 more than 860,000 older adults suffered an asthma episode.<sup>2</sup> This chronic lung disease causes severe breathing problems which can also be life threatening for older adults. The highest mortality rate occurs in the older population.

### **Economic Impact of COPD and Asthma**

The annual cost for treatment for all age groups is approximately \$32 billion for COPD and \$14 billion for asthma. Most of this cost is for medical treatment of acute attacks when individuals struggle to breathe.<sup>2</sup> COPD is particularly common among older adults and significantly compromises their quality of life. As baby boomers age, the number of older adults affected by COPD and asthma is expected to grow significantly.

### **Environmental Hazards, Triggers for COPD and Asthma**

#### **Outdoor Air**

Exposure to air pollution can pose a significant risk to older adults, especially those with lung disease. Particle pollution may aggravate lung diseases including COPD and asthma and may be responsible for serious health effects including hospitalization or premature death. Ozone also may aggravate lung diseases and may result in emergency room and hospital admissions.

#### **Indoor Air**

Pollutants that exist within homes and buildings also may be harmful to persons with COPD or asthma. Many older persons spend up to 90 percent of their time indoors, often at home. Common indoor environmental hazards that may trigger COPD and asthma attacks include tobacco smoke (direct and second-hand smoke), animal dander, dust mites and cockroaches, mold, dust and pollen. Other sources of indoor air pollution that may trigger a COPD or asthma attack include combustion products of oil, gas, kerosene, and coal and building materials and furnishings made of pressed wood

products. Pesticides, household cleaning products, and substances with irritating odors also may exacerbate these diseases.

### **What you can do to control and reduce exposure to environmental hazards**

If you or your loved one experience symptoms of COPD or asthma, consult a doctor and follow a management plan outlined by your health care provider. The key to management of these diseases is through preventive measures and reduced exposure to environmental hazards. Take steps to prevent, control and reduce the frequency of symptoms to allow you or your loved one to breathe easier.

- Avoid tobacco smoke
- Avoid smoke from wood-burning stoves
- Reduce mold, dust mites and cockroaches in your home
- Keep pets out of sleeping areas
- Check furnace and heating units annually
- Fix water leaks promptly
- Check the Air Quality Index (AQI). Reduce outdoor activity as much as possible on poor air quality days. The AQI reports how clean the air is and whether it will affect your health. If you have access to the Internet, you can learn more about the AQI by visiting [www.epa.gov/airnow](http://www.epa.gov/airnow). If you do not have access to a computer or the internet, you can learn more about the daily AQI through newspaper, television and radio weather reports.

### **Learn more about EPA's Aging Initiative**

The Aging Initiative is working to protect the environmental health of older adults through the coordination of research, prevention strategies and public education. For more information about the Aging Initiative, visit <http://www.epa.gov/aging>. A poster entitled "Age Healthier Breathe Easier" on COPD, asthma and older adults is also available on the website to download.

1. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. DHHS. (2002) *Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Surveillance Summary, United States, 1971-2000*.
2. National Institute on Heart, Lung and Blood, NIH, U.S. DHHS. (2002) *Morbidity and Mortality: 2002 Chart Book on Cardiovascular, Lung and Blood Diseases*.